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ABSTRACT

Nominal Group Technique (NGT), a highly structured group process that seeks to provide an orderly procedure for obtaining qualitative information from target groups who are most associated with a problem area, can be used to teach ethics in public relations classes. In NGT, members work in the presence of one another but do not interact except during specific time periods in the process. While it is designed to be a nonthreatening and depersonalized experience, NGT does deliberately create tension. In an undergraduate public relations theory course with 50 students, NGT can be used to cover the topic of ethics over four class periods. During the first class, the teacher introduces the general topic of ethics by means of a lecture. During the second class period, he or she explains NGT's strictly structured interaction, divides the class into groups, and acts as an authoritarian task-master who imposes the silence and independent thinking that are the hallmarks of NGT. Listing of ideas developed in silence moves the students toward consensus about what they think are important ethical situations that should concern a public relations practitioner. During the third class period, NGT is used to help the students identify strategies for dealing ethically with the situations identified during the previous period. These strategies are explained and critiqued during the final class period on the topic. (Includes a guide for using NGT to teach ethics in public relations.) (JL)

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Public Relations Division

USING THE NOMINAL GROUP TECHNIQUE TO TEACH ETHICS IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

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The practice of public relations is fraught with ethical dilemmas: practitioners know this and educators know this. Students need to learn about the ethical situations that occur in the practice and how a professional can deal ethically with these situations. As educators we want students to acknowledge and express their anxieties and concerns about the ethics of public relations. Educators need to confront directly the undercurrent of concern among students that the practice of public relations often is unethical; the students need to learn how to ethically resolve predictable dilemmas they may face when they join the ranks of practitioners. The problems educators face, in a classroom setting, is to raise and resolve these issues about ethics to the students' satisfaction and to do this quickly and efficiently. Discussing ethics is difficult, particularly in a classroom setting: some students find it hard to articulate their inner concerns; while other students find it all to easy to talk about what's right, what's wrong and why. Sometimes it is difficult to generate a classroom discussion on the topic of ethics and public relations without the class taking off on tangents, with a few of the more articulate students dominating the classroom discussion.

A good solution to these problems of teaching ethics in public relations is to use the Nominal Group Technique (NGT). A highly structured group process, the NGT was developed in the late 1960s from social psychological studies of decision-making groups. As proponents of the process explain: "The nominal group process is a structured meeting which seeks to provide an orderly procedure for obtaining qualitative information from target groups who are most closely

associated with a problem area."[1] The NGT is a flexible procedure, and while normally used with small groups of a dozen or less and taking approximately 90 minutes to run comfortably to its conclusion, it can be modified and applied efficiently within a 50-minute class period. One teacher can use the NGT with a large class of students by dividing the students into small groups in class and simultaneously running several small group discussions using the NGT. I have used the NGT to teach ethics in public relations by devoting four class periods to the subject: the first period is an introductory lecture about ethics in organizational behavior (discussing various professional codes; ethics as a systematic study of deciding what is right and wrong; meta-ethics; normative ethics; often bringingin a guest speaker); then, during the second class period, I use the NGT and have the students identify and assign priorities to ethical situations of concernto practitioners of public relations; then at the third class period, I use the NGT and have the students identify appropriate strategies for dealing with the top priority ethical situations identified in the previous class period; then, during the last class period devoted to this subject, I have the students present their possible solutions to the ethical dilemmas, and I critique them, and we have a general discussion on the ethical practice of public relations.

The results I get using the NGT to teach ethics in public relations are impressive: the students--the quiet ones and the talkers--all have an opportunity to express themselves, they are impressed with the candor and openness with which the ethical situations can be discussed, they are comforted by seeing how others share their anxieties and concerns, and they are exposed to a range of options a practitioner can use to resolve ethically problem situations. The burst of enthusiam from the students after each class period has convinced me that using the NGT to teach ethics is one of the best strategies

I have ever used to teach the subject. And, there is a bonus: a related set of issues can be discussed while using the NGT, such as focus group research in public relations, consensus building, and planning and managing meetings, all practical issues in public relations that are demonstrated by the NGT.

The NGT is called a nominal group process because i is a group in name only: members work in the presence of one another but do not interact except during specific time periods in the process. During the nominal group process, members are asked to list silently on paper ideas they have in response to a general question put before the group. After group members have written out their ideas, a moderator (the educator, in this case) asks each member to read one of his or her listed items, with the moderator proceeding from individual to individual in round-robin fashion until all items from each group member are mentioned. The moderator makes a master list of these items, often putting the list on a blackboard or sheets from a flipchart, so everyone can see the master list, and the group is asked to rank and vote for the most important items on the list. Throughout the process, there is no general group discussion; the group members essentially work alone and interact only with the moderator. More details about the NGT are outlined in Figure 1.

While the NGT is designed to be a nonthreatening and depersonalized experience, allowing each member to contribute to the group's consensus, the NGT does create tension--deliberately. Initially, there is a silent writing period, sometimes 30-minutes long (depending on the complexity of the issue being addressed and the expertise of the group members); and the tension is caused by the other group members industriously writing down their ideas, building up peer group pressure to be writing and thinking. After an individual writes down the first few thoughts "off the top of my head," he or she will look up to see the others still writing; the peer group pressure is felt; and, more ideas are generated.

There have been a variety of studies analyzing the effectiveness of the NGT.[2] There is an excellent how-to book, complete with lists of things to bring to the meeting, how to arrange the furniture, what to say, when to say it, how you can modify the technique.[3] The NGT has been used in consumer research,[4] measuring productivity,[5] citizen participation efforts,[6] planning social action programs,[7] and curriculum development,[8] and a variety of other applications.[9]

Here is how I used the process in my undergraduate public relations theory course with 50 students. For the second class period, following the initial class period which focused on ethics in general, I had the students arrange their chairs and themselves into small groups with no more than five students in each; so, I had ten small groups. I told them we were going to get a lot of work done, that I needed their cooperation and undivided attention, that I would ask any student who talked out of turn to leave the class, and that I would be explaining the nominal group process to them, and how it is used in public relations research, while we as a class focus on this question on the blackboard: "What ethical situations should be of concern to a public relations practitioner?" I told them I would allow them to talk only twice during the process, and I would tell them when those times would be, and that there would be a "normal" class discussion at the end of the process.

The moderator of the NGT needs to be a task-master, needs to serve as a model to the group of the importance of the topics and the group's ideas; and with students in a classroom setting, this authoritarian approach to group leadership generally works well. With nonstudents, with people not used to sitting, taking notes, listening to a lecturer, using the NGT requires more sophistication on part of the moderator.[10]

Once there is silence, I go on with the process. I tell the students they are to work essentially alone. First, they are to write down--in their own words and in short phrases; for, their ideas will be presented later verbally; so, all they need to do is make notes to themselves about their response to the question on the blackboard--all the possible ethical situations they can think about that should be of concern to a public relations practitioner. They do this silent writing for 10 minutes. (This modification of the NGT by reducing the silent writing period dramatically reduces the sublety of the ideas generated by the group; but, this is the trade-off for using the process inside a 50-minute class period. In general, the more time devoted to silent writing, the more ideas generated and the more sophisticated and thought-provoking the ideas.)

Each small group needs a recorder and spokesperson, and I do this randomly so that everyone in the room has an equal chance to be a group leader. There are a number of ways you can do this; I tell the students to introduce themselves to each other in the group, by name and date of birth--and then I want to know whose birthday is closest to...and I pick a date: that person then is the leader of the small group. Then, I tell them to be quiet again, and to tell their group leader the situations they think are important for public relations practitioners to consider. I suggest that each person read off their list of situations, and after each person has done that, for them as a small group to discuss the situations and pick out three situations that the group leader will share, in turn, with the rest of the class. Then, I let them talk for about 5-10 minutes.

Two minutes before the end of this initial small group discussion period, I get the students' attention and tell the group leaders that in two minutes I will ask them to tell me about three important ethical situations and that it will be up to the group leader to decide what situations he or she wants to report to the rest of the class. I do this so that the small group discussions,

often by this time being led by the most articulate member of the group (and not by the designated group leader), can be completed and summarized quickly by the designated group leader. At the end of this two-minute period, I call for silence; again, it takes a task-oriented moderator to reimpose the silence and independent thinking that are the hallmark of the NGT. Then, I go round-robin to each group leader asking the student to describe one ethical situation; and, I keep going round-robin, listing the situations on the blackboard, until all the group leaders have described all the situations that are not redundant. I tell the group leaders if they hear one of their ideas being described by another group leader, for them not to mention it; only report to the class about "new" ethical situations that have not been mentioned in class yet.

With all the group leaders' ideas now listed on the blackboard, I tell all the students to look over the list and pick out the top five; again, in silence, with no group discussion, each student writes down the five most important ethical situations. I give them just a few minutes to do this. Then, I allow one more "talking period," allowing the small groups to discuss and pick out as a small group the five most important situations listed on the blackboard. Two minutes before the end of this discussion period, I get the students' attention and tell the group leaders that they are the final judge about the top five situations for their group. At the end of this two-minute period, I ask for the class to be silent again.

The final voting procedure of the NGT is the moment when the group sees consensus developing: it is an important moment in the nominal group process, and I have never conducted the NGT (and I have used the NGT with a wide range of different publics) when there wasn't a lot of interest by the group members in seeing the final voting unfold. I ask each group leader to

name the top five items listed on the blackboard; and, beside the listed item, I record the vote, giving all first choices a weight of five, all second choices a weight of four, all third choices a weight of three, all fourth choices a weight of two and all fifth (and least important) choices a weight of one. This reverse weighting procedure allows those items mentioned by one person as the most important to receive comparable attention as those items mentioned several times by different people as being less imporant in their pick of the top five items. Variations on the final voting procedure for the NGT are discussed elsewhere.[11] I have a student make a copy of the final listing of items, putting them in order of their priority. It is a full and busy 50-minute class period, and the students leave eager to come back to the next class period and identify strategies for dealing with these ethical situations. Each class of students will generate their own priority listing of ethical situations. The result from one of my classes is shown in Figure 2.

The purpose of using the NGT in teaching ethics in public relations is not to generate an all-inclusive list of ethical situations; instead, the purpose is to develop consensus among the students about what they think are important ethical situations that should concern a practitioner. The more experienced and sophisticated the students, the more sophisticated--and complicated--will be the ethical situations. Using the NGT in this way allows the educator to address the topic of ethics in public relations at an appropriate level for the students.

For the third class period, I use the same modified NGT to have the students identify strategies for dealing ethically with the situations identified during the previous class period. I make an additional modification in the NGT by having each small group focus on separte ethical situations. I divide the students into the appropriate number of small groups; and, I randomly designate

leaders for each group. Each student is asked to work in silence for the first 10-15 minutes of the class period, writing down notes about how a practitioner could deal professional and ethically with the situation. After this silent writing period, I allow each small group to discuss the various strategies and for the group leader to make a list of the more effective strategies. I ask the group leaders to record these strategies in an exam booklet and to be prepared at the next class period to tell the rest of the class about their group's ideas for resolving the ethical dilemmas. Before the end of the class period, I remind the small group leaders that each leader is to be the final judge about how best to express the various strategies suggested by the group members.

For the fourth class period, I have the group leaders explain the different strategies a practitioner might use to deal with the different ethical situations identified by the class as being important. I go through the priority list, one at a time, having the appropriate group leader make suggestions for dealing with the situation, and I critique the suggestions. I encourage all the students to critique and comment on the suggestions; and a lively class discussion is underway. Some educators may prefer to devote more than one class period to the reports from the small groups. I conclude this series of class periods devoted to ethics in public relations by returning again to the various professional codes, pointing out to the students their responsibilities as individuals and as public relations practitioners to behave ethically. I also point out to the students that the NGT is useful in focus group research, how group consensus can be biased and unique to the group, how public relations practitioners need to know how to use a variety of group planning processes, and how the Nominal Group Technique can be used in a variety of ways.

FIGURE 1 Educator Guide for Using the Nominal Group Technique To Teach Ethics in Public Relations

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STEP ONE: SILENT GENERATION OF IDEAS IN WRITING

1. Arrange students in small groups; designate leaders.
2. Ask students to work silently and independently.
3. Sanction students who do not work in silence.
4. Charge the students with the task of writing down as many ideas as they can to the question before the group.
5. Present in writing the question or statement the group is to consider.
6. Explain how the results of the NGT will be used and how important each student's ideas are to the process.
7. Avoid requests for clarification that might generate a class discussion; resolve each students questions on a one-to-one basis; explain that the nominal group is a group in name only: each student is to work independently and in silence until told otherwise.
8. Allow enough time for the generation of lots of ideas.

STEP TWO: ROUND-ROBIN RECORDING OF IDEAS FROM GROUP LEADERS.

1. Allow limited small group discussion, with designated leaders to determine most important ideas suggested by small group.
2. After small group discussion period, ask for silence again.
3. Explain purpose of NGT is to facilitate the generation of ideas, and leaders should report only new ideas not yet mentioned by other group leaders; if a group leader thinks an idea is similar to yet distinct from other ideas mentioned, then list it.
4. In round-robin fashion, go from group leader to group leader recording verbatim each new idea.
5. Record ideas as rapidly as possible.
6. Avoid paraphrasing unless with the expressed approval of the person mentioning the idea.
7. Make entire list visable to all in the classroom.

STEP THREE: SPECIAL SMALL GROUP DISCUSSIONS AND PRELIMINARY VOTING

1. Allow each small group to discuss listed ideas and pick out a specified number of "the most important."
2. Have group leaders serve as final judge concerning the most important ideas.
3. Ask for silence, so group leaders can make final decisions.

STEP FOUR: FINAL VOTE

1. Ask group leaders to report their priority selection of ideas.
2. Record votes on master list that all in room can see.
3. Point out those ideas that received the most votes.
4. After the final tallying of votes, allow a group discussion.

FIGURE 2 Results of Nominal Group Technique Focused on Question, "What ethical situations should be of concern to a public relations practitioner?"

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1. Your organization puts out an inferior service or product, yet your boss wants to publicize the service/product...and you know it's inferior. What should you do?

2. A cover-up situation of misleading the public; for example, manipulating statistics.

3. You know the product is harmful, but you try to beat the system by working around the legalities--because you know the product/service will sell.

4. Top management is asking employees (union members) for concessions so that the organization can stay afloat.

5. Elite member of an organization has committed a white collar crime: what is the position of the public relations practitioner?

6. Foreign bribes.

7. Staging psuedo events for clients to get publicity for them.

8. Admitting the organization has made a mistake; for example, a product recall.

FOOTNOTES

1. "The Nominal Group as a Research Instrument for Exploratory Health Studies," Andrew H. Van de Ven and Andre L. Delbecq, American Journal of Public Health, March, 1972.

2. "A Comparison of Two Group-Process Techniques," John Salasin, D. Entingh and K. Thackston, IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management, Nov. 1981. "Effective Decision Making Within the Organization: A comparison of Regular, NGT and Delphi Group Processes," John E. Crowford and William B. Cossitt, paper presented at the annual meeting of the Western Speech Communication Assn., Feb. 1980. "Improving the Quality of Group Judgment: Social Judgment Analysis and the Nominal Group Technique," J. Rohrbaugh, Organizational Behavior & Human Performance, Oct. 1981.

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9. The ERIC Clearinghouse data base contains more than two dozen citations to the NGT within the past ten years.

10. See the suggestions in Group Techniques for Program Planning, by Van de Ven, Delbecq and Gustafson., pgs. 69-82.

11. ibid.